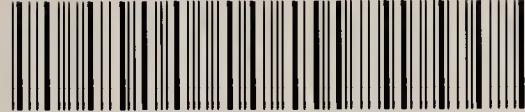


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Koussinoc

THE INDIAN TRADING POST

By

HERBERT G. JONES

Address given for
Daughters of Colonial Wars
Portland, Maine
August - 1938

THE INDIAN TRADING POST

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ALBERT C. JONES

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Koussinoc, the Indian trading post.
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Koussinoc

The wise men and the scholars declare that history never repeats itself. I am afraid they are quite wrong for if you should stroll through the Oaks here in our own City of Portland any summer's evening you will see history repeating itself in a most interesting way — in the playing of a simple game of English bowls — just as it has been played in old England for the past 1,000 years. It was a game that Henry VIII was passionately fond of and it was very popular during the reign of Queen Elizabeth, and it was this very game that Sir Francis Drake was playing on Plymouth Ho when he was interrupted by an excited messenger saying — "The ships of the enemy have been sighted off the coast, Sir. It is the Spanish Armada, Sir." "All right," coolly replied Drake. "They can take their turn. Let's finish the game."

The doughty admiral not only won his game but destroyed the mighty fleet of the Spaniards for all time. It is always interesting, I think, to speculate what would have happened to our world if some of the great events of history had been reversed. Supposing Drake had won his game of bowls but lost the great battle on the seas? Well, undoubtedly this continent of ours would have become Spanish land under a Spanish king. For that matter, too, if the English had been defeated by the French at Quebec, North America would have remained New France. And if it had not been for the establishment of a little-known Indian trading-post in the heart of the Maine forests on the shores

of the Kennebec River back in 1628 the famous Mayflower Colony at Plymouth would never have succeeded. More than once when the Pilgrim Fathers were on the verge of absolute starvation amidst the rigors of winter it was food supplies from the Kennebec that kept them alive. And it was the successful operation of this little trading-post by a group of hardy adventurers from Plymouth that furnished the money to enable the discouraged Fathers to pay off their debts to the parent Company in England and thus enable them to keep the Plymouth Colony a going concern.

The Kennebec! One hundred and fifty miles of water from Moosehead Lake to the Atlantic Ocean. Could some magic key unlock the past what a picture those early days along the Kennebec would make!

For there is hardly a part of the lovely Kennebec Valley that is not steeped in history and romance. For ages it was a vast wilderness, the haunts of the Kennebec Indians who wandered throughout its dense forests, fished in the abundant lakes and streams, and built their villages and "resting places" along the shores of the peaceful Kennebec River.

While DeMonts, the French explorer, is credited with the discovery of the mouth of the river just 15 years before the advent of the Pilgrim Fathers at Plymouth Rock, it was left to Captain Raleigh Gilbert, a nephew of Sir Walter Raleigh and a "sea dog of old Devon" to explore the river itself. Anchoring his little ship "Mary and John" at the entrance in 1607, he and a part of his crew sailed boldly up

the river in small boats and reached the ancient Indian Village of Koussinoc which occupied the very site on which the modern city of Augusta now stands. It is recorded that he found a "greate store of grapes of two sorts, both red, but one a mervelous deep red." Here he was greeted by the Canibas Indians, a tribe of the "gentle Abnaki" often called the "Dawn People," who had made this spot their home and ancestral hunting ground since time immemorial.

According to their traditions these inhabitants of early Augusta held this land directly from the hand of the Creator, and it had been theirs from the beginning of time. These children of the wilderness were nomadic in their habits, roaming over immense stretches of hunting grounds, continually travelling from river to river and lake to lake. The sites of many of their encampments may be identified in the remains of burned, crumbling rocks and vestiges of debris scattered throughout the whole valley of the Kennebec. But Koussinoc, which in the Indian language means "the sacred site beside the rippling waters," was the favorite resort or resting place for these Kennebec Indians; here the solemn councils were held every autumn before going on the great moose hunt to the "Lake of the Moose." In the springtime, too, they celebrated by great feasts and festivities the return of the braves with their trophies.

After the feasting and games were ended they gathered around huge campfires to sing their tribal songs and to retell the old folk tales that had been handed down from generation to generation. It was also the scene of their sacred rites and ceremonies and of the mysterious magic

of their medicine men and sorcerers. Primitive though they were, these Indians possessed an inherited store of legends and folklore that was truly remarkable; they also had a wonderfully musical language and a system of writing on birch bark for communication with distant tribes. The women were comely and the men tall and stately, the chief characteristics of their nature being a fervent love for their children and an intense veneration for their ancestors, native woods and waters.

A good illustration of the intelligence and loyalty of these natives among themselves may be found in their very interesting custom of "choosing the Nidoba." Every young brave on arriving at the age when he began to hunt and fish for himself chose a friend of his own age whom he called his "Nidoba," a name which signified a comrade until death. These two young braves united themselves by a mutual bond to dare all danger and to assist each other as long as both should live. Thus, every Abnaki Indian had one true friend at all times ready to give his life for him, and these two comrades believed that after death they would be reunited in the "Happy Hunting Ground."

Their religion was spiritualistic and they believed in a great spirit "Kechi Niweskw" who was the Master and Ruler of all good things and in an evil spirit "Matchi Niweskw" who was the cause of all disasters and tribulations. Undoubtedly this was the reason why the Roman Catholic religion appealed to them more than did the mysticism of the Puritans, and as early as 1648, a French Jesuit

priest, Father Gabriele Druillettes successfully established a church mission which was welcomed by these simple people of the forest. They loved and revered him, begging him never to leave them. They built him a canoe but would not permit him to paddle saying, "Pray for us, Father, and we will row for you."

Notwithstanding the activities of the French Jesuits among the Abnaki tribes, these Indians always considered themselves within the jurisdiction of the English, and never under the French. But the English settlers in contrast to the French made no effort to christianize them. They did nothing to improve their conditions and provided them with neither teachers nor preachers. When trade ceased to be profitable they left them. In contrast, however, the French used every means in their power to make allies of the natives through trade, dissemination of religion and intermarriage. The friendly Abnaki desired an alliance with the English and asked for their protection but were refused.

According to historians this folly and lack of foresight on the part of the Pilgrim Fathers was one of the direct causes of the French-Indian Wars. It is interesting to note, however, that the "gentle Abnaki" were the last of the Indian tribes to become involved in the war and were far less cruel than their allies. In the massacres and conflagrations of King Philip's War there were about 300 white people killed and many led into captivity, but there is no actual record that the Abnaki ever tortured or mistreated a prisoner.

With these intelligent, gentle, yet primitive Indians, the early history of Augusta is inextricably interwoven, as the first actual white settlement here came into being in 1628, when a group of adventurous pilgrims from the Plymouth Colony established a trading-post on the spot where the weather-beaten Fort Western now stands. Here they sold merchandise and food stuffs at great profit to the Kennebec Indians in exchange for valuable furs. For thirty-four years this peaceful trading-post flourished and prospered; thus, these men of Plymouth may be truly regarded as pioneers who opened to civilization this portion of the Kennebec Valley. No spot along the Kennebec River is of more historic importance. This site of early Koussinoc and its trading-post was the scene of the first successful English Colony in North America and set into motion forces that ultimately made and transformed the gloomy wilderness into a mighty land. This unique outpost of commerce in the heart of the primeval forest seems indeed like a peaceful pastoral interlude to the long cruel tragedy of the French Indian Wars that later devastated and retarded the development of Maine for nearly 100 years.

It is a favorite axiom that the best stories of history have never been written. Though historians have been profuse in their glowing narratives of the early coastline explorers, little has been written and little is known of this trading-post in the heart of the then unknown and untraveled wilderness, so that its history has lapsed into almost legendary form.

Noted leaders of the Plymouth Colony are known to have visited this trading-post from time to time, such as Governor Bradford, Myles Standish, John Alden, and Thomas Southworth; but of their adventures and impressions the records are strangely silent.

In 1625, Edward Winslow of the Plymouth Colony accompanied by "some of ye old standards," by which phrase he referred to other members of the colony, bought of the Indians of the Kennebec district 700 pounds of good beaver and other furs for a shallop-load of corn. They were shrewd Yankee traders even in those days! This started a brisk trade and the pilgrims, recognizing a rich source of profit, secured a grant of land on both sides of the river which enabled them to control commerce with the Indians. This grant later became known as the Kennebec Purchase.

Three years later the trading-post was built on the east bank of the river and its first commander was John Howland from the Plymouth Colony. Of the post itself we have no certain knowledge. It probably was a long building roofed with bark and lighted with windows of oiled paper, glass being rare. As was customary in those days it undoubtedly was protected by a high stockade of logs and was built for security and permanence. As late as 1692, remains of the building were still visible among the new grown trees and thick undergrowth.

From the scanty records extant there is evidence that the establishment of the Koussinoc trading-post contributed two significant chapters in the history of the Pilgrim Colony at

Plymouth. First, that the rich profits of this Indian trade enabled the Pilgrim Fathers to pay off their obligations to the English owners of their Colony, and thus allowed them to carry on successfully, their settlement of the New World. Secondly, at a time when on the verge of starvation, they were able to exist on the food supplies received from this Kennebec region. In view of this, it is rather surprising to learn how little the histories of Plymouth have to say of the old trading-post and the men who occupied it for so many years. It is intimated, however, that they did not care to advertise this very profitable source of supplies and were purposely silent.

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During the years from 1647 to 1652, while under the administration of John Winslow, regarded as the most efficient and esteemed man in the Plymouth Colony, the trading-post reached its greatest height of prosperity. It was during this period that Father Druillettes was encouraged by Winslow himself to establish his Mission Church of the Assumption, and it is said that the doughty Puritan, Captain Myles Standish, who was known to have catholic tendencies, was often seen to visit the good father and his little church. It is apparent from the little we know, that the everyday life of these pilgrim pioneers was marked by severe hardships and privations. There were no roads worthy of the name, and bears, wolves, and other wild beasts made life hazardous. It is evident that they had no thought of colonizing the territory or any intention of making it their home, as there is no mention of social intercourse of any kind. But a certain fascination, I think,

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surrounds these intrepid adventurers far away from all refinements of civilization. The misfortunes, hardships and dangers of pioneer life made these early traders hardy and resourceful in a locality where only the most rugged could survive.

For a time the Indians brought in large quantities of valuable furs and sold them for mere trifles, but gradually as the numbers of traders increased the competition arose. The natives, too, became acquainted with the true value of their merchandise, and as the post was a great trading center, it attracted itinerant groups of unscrupulous traders who did not hesitate to defraud them. There is an old Indian saying, "If white man deceive Indian once — shame on white man. If white man deceive Indian twice — shame on Indian." Squabbles over trading rights arose causing fierce dissension, with the result that trade gradually languished. Another cause of the loss of trade was the absence of adequate local government and the fact that the Plymouth Colony was too remote to enforce stringent laws.

An interesting relic of these days exists in the copy of an old deed which is still to be seen in the Registry Office of Lincoln County. In the year 1672 Natahanda, a sagamore of the Kennebec Indians, who was the son of old Mata-wormet, conveyed a large tract of land to five members of the Plymouth Colony, William Bradford, Edward Winslow, Thomas Prince, Thomas Willet and William Paddy for "two hogsheads of provisions — (one of peas and the other

of bread) — two cloth coats, two gallons of wine and a bottle of strong waters." The Indian Chief unknowingly had signed away his birthright when he intended only to lease fishing and hunting rights. This proved a bitter source of contention and friction in later years.

Eventually the rights at the old post were sold in 1661 to four enterprising men of the colony, Antitas Boyes, Edward Tyng, Thomas Brattel, and John Winslow who vainly tried to revive the business but finally abandoned the attempt, leaving the site to the impoverished natives and the wild beasts.

With the outbreak of King Philip's War in 1675, the few remaining Indians of the once flourishing trading center made their way to Canada, migrating by way of the Kennebec River and the old Chaudiere Trail. The historic pilgrim trading-post soon fell into decay and the picturesque village of the "Gentle Abnaki" gradually disappeared from the shores of the Kennebec. A touch of pathos, in regard to the decline of the Indians appears in a story published in the "Kennebec Journal" of 1828. It tells how the last of the once proud queens of the tribe, now blind and in rags, begged for bread from the soldiers stationed at Fort Richmond. The forest growth soon obliterated all traces of ancient Koussinoc, and the early trading-post and the romance and fascination of the early Pilgrim experiment became a thing of the past. The wilderness had claimed the Kennebec Valley for its own again.

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